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The
American Historical Review

JUSTIN WINSOR

JUSTIN WINSOR died at Cambridge, Massachusetts, on October 22, 1897, in the sixty-seventh year of his age. In him American history lost its foremost student, America lost its foremost librarian, and hosts of students, living in all parts of the country, lost a devoted friend whose unfailing knowledge was always at their disposal.

Even before entering college Winsor began the serious study of history, and during his Freshman year saw his first book through the press—a *History of Duxbury*, his ancestral town. His taste for this class of pursuits grew rapidly and he determined to devote his life to them. He soon thought out a scheme of note-taking and continued to accumulate memoranda, on the lines thus early laid down, for a period of nearly forty years—until within ten days of his sudden and untimely death. Ordinary antiquarian inquiries, the study of constitutional topics, and the elucidation of important problems in our political history had slight interest for him. On the other hand, bibliographical and cartographical details which bewildered most students only charmed him. Whenever a book having anything to do with American history passed through his hands he carefully noted everything new in it, and especially any reference to new material; whenever he handled a map of America or of any portion of it he remarked its peculiar features and illustrated his notes by a sketch. Once a week he arranged the memoranda collected during the week and filed them away in portfolios or in boxes; in later years he used many of them to annotate interleaved copies of his own works. All this he did by personal labor, for he always maintained that a historical student to accomplish anything of value must handle all the books and papers with his own hands. This method, persistently pursued through a long series of years, brought together a

mass of information not only unequalled in the annals of American historical labor, but already in suitable form for easy use.

The first opportunity to make an effective use of this information on a large scale occurred in connection with the editing of the *Memorial History of Boston*, which in the excellence of its illustration and in the richness of its bibliographical notes showed the hand of a master and opened a new field for American historical literature. This great work, in the beginning at least, was the conception of another, but the real editorial work was done by Winsor. The *Narrative and Critical History of America* was his own conception modified in an important point by the wishes of his publishers. Winsor's original design was a collection of critical essays on the sources of information, but in the plan as finally adopted the writer of each chapter stated his conclusions in the form of a narrative and generally left Winsor free to reinforce his leading points in a critical essay. This proved to be an exceedingly fortunate arrangement for all concerned. It enabled the editor to secure the services of many eminent and able men who had the knowledge, time, and patience to write a narrative, but who found the composition of a critical essay on the lines of the editor's own essays beyond their power or their time. In all such cases Winsor at once stepped into the gap and did all the bibliographical work himself or supplemented the work of his contributors. The fact that the book contained a history of America in a concise form combined with the reputation of many writers who contributed to it gave it a standing which a series of essays in bibliography would not have had ; it made it possible to sell large numbers of the book, and in this way to place an authoritative and stimulating work within the reach of the mass of students of our history. The same general plan of interweaving narrative and critical bibliography was followed by Winsor in his later works, one of which, his *Columbus*, is the best example of its type that has yet appeared—and this quite apart from the strong opinions expressed by its author.

Of the value of Winsor's contributions to our historical literature and to the cause of historical study in our country, more especially of the study of American history, there can be no question : he made the scientific study of American history possible by making available the rich mines of material ; he solved through the aid of cartography many problems which hitherto had been insoluble ; he gave a stimulus to a generation of younger men to achieve distinction by scientific work in his chosen field ; and he left behind him in his *Memorial History*, his *America*, and his *Columbus* the three best books of their classes yet produced in this country or elsewhere.

This notice, however, is designed to be critical, as we may be sure Winsor himself would have desired, and there were defects in his work and in his method which should be pointed out. In the first place the plan of his great work, the *America*, and his own interests as a student made inevitable an entire lack of perspective, since the proportions of the work depended in great measure on the cartographical and bibliographical material to be described. Furthermore, Winsor was distinctly a student of that portion of our history which came to a close with the ratification of the federal constitution; the bibliography of the later period was too disorganized to be treated as he wished to treat it, and he also thought that a sufficient amount of time had not yet elapsed to treat critically the history of this later epoch. In place of stopping his work at 1783 or 1788 he included in a portion of one volume the history of the United States from 1788 to 1850, but it cannot be said that he and his contributors more than touched the fringe of this vast and highly important subject. Moreover, there is almost nothing said of the bibliography and nothing of the history of the momentous epoch extending from 1850 to the close of the Civil War. The work also includes a volume devoted to American states other than our own, and this portion is distinctly disappointing.

No one could know Winsor intimately or work in the same field with him and fail to be impressed by his great liberality as far as difference of opinion on historical matters was concerned. A strong outspoken man with immense capacity for work, he was anxious to discover and to express the truth. He naturally held firm well-defined opinions upon almost all historical matters within his field of research; but there has seldom been a master who was more tolerant of the opinions of others. My own acquaintance with him began in a controversy as to the interpretation of a map; it was confirmed by a controversy over the application of a written description to certain well-known topographical features. Both of these topics were within his own peculiar province and every year for the last twelve years witnessed a renewal of the debate on one or other of these points—and our friendship strengthened every year during this whole time. Winsor enjoyed disputation on historical subjects and liked opposition when it seemed to him to be founded on a study of the sources. He fully recognized the right of other students to have opinions of their own. It was this tolerance of what he regarded as honest error that made him a most successful editor and made it possible for men of strong conviction to work with him through the course of the twelve volumes of his co-operative works. So far as my present information goes he never altered

a statement of fact or of opinion of one of his writers without that writer's active consent ; he printed their contributions as they wished them to be printed. His own opinions he expressed in very fine type in an "editorial note," which was sometimes inserted on the same page as the controverted assertion but was more often concealed amidst a mass of bibliographical detail at the end of the chapter. This frequently makes it exceedingly difficult to get a clear statement on a particular point ; but this is undoubtedly a great advantage, as the points over which these difficulties arise are precisely those on which it is impossible for historical students as a body to come to a definite conclusion. In the minor matter of the spelling of proper names and in the use of Old-Style or New-Style dates, this liberality worked badly, as each contributor pursued his own independent course while the editor did the same.

The qualities which made Winsor a great editor were largely administrative ; they contributed in no small degree to his success in the administration of the two large libraries with which he was associated. He chose his assistants with care, and having once chosen them he seldom interfered in their labors. He also had wonderful aptness for mechanical device and was entirely untrammelled by library traditions and methods, as he came to the Boston Public Library without any training in "library economy." As a librarian his important work was in liberalizing the relations of libraries to their users and to the reading public. While in Boston he lost no opportunity to make the resources of the Public Library better known ; as one means to this end he published his *Reader's Hand-Book of the American Revolution*, which remains to this day a model of compact and reasonable bibliographical statement. He came to the Harvard College Library at the moment when new methods of historical teaching were coming into vogue. He entered most heartily into the new movement and converted the library into a laboratory for those departments whose evidence consists mainly in printed matter.

Few students in our day have opened new avenues of learning ; but Winsor may fairly be said to have done so. He first systematically applied the evidence furnished by contemporary maps to the elucidation of difficult historical problems. He enjoyed peculiar advantages in this work ; he was a thorough scholar and an accomplished linguist ; every language of Western Europe was at his disposal, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian ; and the same linguistic faculty enabled him to understand arguments based on linguistics and to interpret strange and uncouth words or at all events to seize upon flaws in other interpretations of them ; he was also an excellent and ready draughtsman and easily reproduced in

his notes important cartographical points. Long years of study combined with his historical and linguistic training made him a sure guide in cartographical controversies ; he always insisted, however, on the danger of ignorant and amateurish interpretations of maps, regarding them as perversions rather than interpretations. Of American cartography as a whole, Winsor's knowledge was pre-eminent ; in certain portions of the field he had exclusive information ; in other portions of the field other men had equal or superior knowledge.

Winsor was a most easy writer ; the mechanical operation of writing, which distresses so many persons, was a source of joy to him ; he liked to see the words flow from his ready pen. All his note-taking and manuscript writing he did himself with ordinary writing materials. He was also an extremely facile composer of most formidable sentences. His days between breakfast and dark were devoted to library work and note-taking ; his evenings to society and proof-reading ; his composition he did before breakfast, writing sheet after sheet and pasting notes here and there in the greatest profusion. His manuscript once made up was immediately despatched to the printer without any revision whatever ; and, as he also maintained that the truest form of historical expression was the bare statement of fact in bald language, the inevitable result of this headlong haste was that he frequently made statements which most men would have sent out under some less uncompromising form of words. Frequently the phrases chosen were not the most fortunate that could have been selected. Errors, too, in small matters, as names and dates, occurred and were perpetuated in the printed page ; for, relying on his wonderful memory, he did not systematically verify every title and date in proof.

Winsor was not only indefatigable in collecting information and in disseminating knowledge through the medium of printed books ; he opened his ample stores for the benefit of all persons who wished to draw from them. Although an exceedingly industrious man he was a most sociable man ; he liked to see other persons and to talk with them or, when this was not possible, to correspond with them. While at the Boston Public Library he trained himself to interruption, stopping his pen in the middle of a sentence instead of at the end. In this way he was able to take up the unfinished thought at once upon the departure of his visitor. It happened, therefore, that one no sooner appeared within the door of his room than his pen was laid aside and the inquisitor, whom many men would have dreaded, greeted with a cheery "Sit down." Whatever Winsor knew of American bibliography or of library methods was at his questioner's disposal ; if the desired information could not be given

at the library he looked up the point at his house, where his memoranda were kept, and at once sent a note to his questioner. Unknown inquirers from a distance received the same cordial attention and an enormous amount of time was devoted to answering them. He also had the reputation of a wide acquaintance with men and of being an excellent judge of them. His advice was constantly sought in the selection of librarians, authors, editors, secretaries, and teachers, and it was always cheerfully given ; the number of persons who owe their present positions in part at least to his friendly counsel is very large.

As an historical editor, as a librarian, as a master of American historical cartography, as a student of the bibliography of American history, Justin Winsor was without a peer. Seldom has the world seen a firmer friend or a more generous opponent. His death leaves us without a person to turn to in one of the most important departments of our work.

EDWARD CHANNING.